

Rise of the plagiarist in the digital age by Abney and Associates

Thanks to the internet, it has never been easier to steal other peoples work. There's also a high risk you'll be found out. So why do it? Rhodri Marsden goes in search of a little originality

It's not that hard to think of something totally original. If you don't worry about it being any good, it's easy. "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," was Noam Chomsky's spirited attempt in his ground-breaking 1957 book on linguistics, Syntactic Structures. "Hold the newsreader's nose squarely, waiter, or friendly milk will counterman my trousers," was Stephen Fry's during an episode of A Bit Of Fry And Laurie. But when novelist John Gardner used the phrase "opening the throttle at the last moment" in his 1983 book Icebreaker, it's unlikely that he sat back and congratulated himself on being the first to have written it. [Innovation](#) wasn't what he was aiming for, after all; he was just trying to describe someone driving a scooter. But Google Books, that vast indexing project, informs us that Gardner's was the only book to contain this phrase until another, Vestige Of Evil by Len Vorster, appeared on Amazon in 2011. A section of the novel, one of two books self-published online under that name, featured other phrases that were no longer unique to Icebreaker, such as "the ice and snow were not as raw and killing as this" and "the slope angling gently downwards to flatten". The many coincidences were startling, though if it wasn't for the [internet](#), nobody need ever have known.

In fact, if it wasn't for the internet, there might never have been a Vestige Of Evil. Vorster (not the Australian concert pianist of the same name, and most likely a nom de plume) appears, like millions of others, to have been inspired by the sheer [quantity of online content](#) and the new opportunities for digital self-expression. With a potential audience of billions, the prospect of contributing can be thrilling; meanwhile, the moral responsibility we traditionally attach to creative expression has been downgraded by the sheer ease of copying someone else's work. When Richard Condon lifted sentences wholesale from Robert Graves' I, Claudius and quietly stuck them into The Manchurian Candidate, he did it the good old-fashioned way. Today, technology covertly assists us: control + C to copy images, prose, code, video and more, control + V to paste. The consequences of this can range from sly postings of other people's witticisms on Twitter in pursuit of between glory, to print-on-demand books that are merely duplicates of other books. Driven by a combination of greed, confusion, ignorance, pressure, laziness and ambition, an increasing number of people are looking at stuff other people have done and thinking, "Wow. That's really good. I'll pretend that I did it."